

Soc 4014 The Serpent

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CIA spy film: It's not Dullesville

"The Serpent" is playing at area theaters. In the cast are Yul Brynner, Henry Fonda, Philippe Noiret, Dirk Bogarde, Espionage drama; adults, older teens.

By Tony Mastroianni

An occasional whiff of the truth, a certain cynicism and now and then a bright bit of dialog mark "The Serpent" which also is marked and marred by a few purely hokey touches.

"Serpent" is not the usual cloak-and-dagger, deeds of derring-do type of spy movie. The cloaks and daggers have been replaced by computers and polygraphs. What remains eternal in these tales, however, is the old double and even triple cross.

And it turns out that being armed with a computer isn't much better than using the archaic dagger.

Yul Brynner is a Russian KGB agent who defects. The scene is Paris but he demands and eventually gets the American Embassy as his sanctuary.

In exchange for asylum he offers the CIA a list of traitors working for the Kremlin in Western Europe, except in England.

The CIA fellows headed by one Alan Davies (Henry Fonda), and with token assistance from a British intelligence lad played by Dirk Bogarde, keep running Brynner's answers through the computer, finally decide he can be trusted.

The various governments are informed of the traitors they have working within their structures but before they can act the men are killed.

The deaths look like suicide, but they are not. There is a shadowy figure present each time and to make a hokey bit even hokier the fellow carries a cigaret case with a serpent on its cover.

The moviemakers have a fairly good tale of deception on a grand scale, and then they do things like that on the assumption that the viewer may not be able to tumble to what's going on. Another nod to the usual run of spy movies is to have the CIA offer Brynner live-in housekeeper who is obviously not a housekeeper.

When the CIA leader personally tumbles to it we have a scene in which a polygraph test re-

run, and something we have all seen early in the movie is pointed out. It is something the CIA experts apparently missed. Come on now!

But over all "Serpent" is a low-key espionage procedural drama that has more good moments than bad.

Many of these are contributed by French actor Philippe Noiret who is good even in bad movies. He plays a French agent whose loyalty is suspect.

He has a mixture of wry wit and urbanity about him that make his few moments on the screen something to look forward to.

One of the picture's more bizarre moments is a mass funeral for a bunch of dead intelligence agents. Noiret, looking on, comments that "...every snoop is here to pay his last respects. A single bomb could put spying back 20 years."

The publicity for the film claims the story is true. For those looking for factual parallels, aside from the name similarity of Allan Davies and Allan Dulles, there is a closing scene in which Brynner is exchanged for a captured U-2 flier. It isn't too long ago that the United States traded Russian agent Rudolf Abel for Francis Gary Powers.